Today, we come across our traditional Advent passage with John the Baptist (or John the Baptizer). It seems that we hear about John the Baptist only right during this time of the year, but his message of personal repentance and change is relevant throughout the year, not just during the season of Advent. Well, John, as you know, was not your typical prophet. He looked and dressed differently, ate exotic food, and hung out mostly in the wilderness. He was more of an “outsider” representing those who were on the margin while stirring an impact on the inside. He may not be as flamboyant or influential as his cousin but he did carry an important message to the people. God had chosen John to be THE voice of the people to alarm their attention.

Despite his eccentric appearance and personality, John’s credibility of being the 1st prophet sent by God in more than 400 years was not overlooked. God might appeared to be silent, absent, or abandoned God’s own people during those years, but God had not forgotten about them. God was actively at work amongst the people, preparing them for what was to come, just as they were in the wilderness for those 40 years. The waiting of the long-expected Messiah would soon to be over. God’s promise would soon be fulfilled. But John was not to be the one.

So when people heard about this new prophet who hangs out in the wilderness, people came from all over the region wanted to check him out to see what he had to say. The people came with high hope and expectation, but instead they were disappointed by John’s message of repentance and frightful fears and warnings of what was about to take place. John made clear that he himself was NOT the Messiah, but the one who is more powerful than him was to come after him. He didn’t want to steal the thunder away from the true Messiah.

But who really likes to be told that we need to get our acts together before it’s too late? Probably no one. Do you? We don’t like to hear that from our parents, our spouse, our teachers or our doctors….and certainly not from God. But that’s exactly what God’s message was... that something was not right and we must address it now and fix it before it’s too late. The consequences would be too great to bear.

John offered this message of HOPE that if they repent and confess of their sins, God will graciously embrace them. God would still take them back through the coming of the Messiah before reaching to the point of no-return and something catastrophic may happen.

Remember back in September, a NJ Transit train bounded for Hoboken terminal slammed into the station and killed one innocent woman who happened to be at the wrong place and at the wrong time? After months of investigation by the Federal Transportation Safety Board, they came to the conclusion that the motorman was having sleep apnea and that his train was going almost twice the speed that it was supposed to, as it pulled into the terminal. They also pointed out that this whole tragedy could’ve been prevented, IF there had been a warning system implemented onboard that train. This warning system would’ve alarmed the sleepy train engineer of the excessive speed, kicked in the automatic braking system, and took over control of the train and prevented tragedy like this.

Sometimes our lives are like that, when we are all vulnerable of falling asleep and become oblivious of the danger ahead and the consequence of going too fast or heading in the wrong direction. We all needed a “wake up call” and sometimes the voice that we would most listen to must come from the outside. There may be a hidden curve, debris, or some blind spots ahead that we don’t see down the track OR perhaps we simply need to slow things down, because we were going at a pace that is too fast.

**Some of us might be like this train operator who had fallen asleep behind the control. We need to Wake UP!!! We might have been steering a runaway train that is spiraling out of control or heading imminently towards a curve of destruction.**

In our text this morning, we have heard that outside voice calling out in the wilderness trying to wake us up. But sometimes we never pay attention to it, or we choose to stubbornly ignore it. ***“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight!”[[1]](#footnote-1) The ax is lying at the root of the trees, every tree that does not bear good fruit is to be cut down and is to be thrown into the fire.[[2]](#footnote-2)***

When John saw this group of Pharisees (more religiously focused leaders) and Sadducees (more politically focused leaders) approaching the Jordan River where he was baptizing people, immediately he called them out and referred to them as “a brood of vipers”- “a bunch of poisonous snakes”[[3]](#footnote-3)

But notice that John didn’t condemn them of their actions or their unrepented sins. He was simply the messenger and let God be the judge. Nevertheless, John did issue them an ultimatum….a final warning, before the ax was laid at the root of the tree!

Many of these Pharisees and Sadducees claimed that they were the chosen people of God because they had Abraham has their father. By the virtue of their birthright, they became the spiritual elite and automatically granted entrance to the Kingdom of God. But that’s not how it works. **Our salvation is not by who we are or by what WE have humanly accomplished, but by our faithful obedience and response to God’s grace and God’s calling.** We’ve been given too many “2nd chances”, yet we still don’t get it. We’ve abused that privilege of God’s graciousness and mercy over and over again.

John’s message of repentance and change was not an easy one to take for anyone, including us. It was certainly easier said than done. It is, however, never too late to “reverse the course”, make a U-Turn so to speak from what we’ve been doing. We must not only look upon others who need to repent while neglecting to examine our own flaws as well. We must be accountable to our own actions and our own sins.

When John said that we must bear **“fruits worthy of repentance”**, he meant that **our beliefs must be measured up with our actions**. It is not enough just to say that we believe, **we must own up to our own words.**

John’s message of repentance was targeted not just to those Pharisees and Sadducees, but to ALL of humanity, including you and me as well. We are ALL “brood of vipers” who have fallen short of God’s glory. We ALL have disappointed, disobeyed God, and deserved God’s rejection and punishments.

This call of repentance requires a total surrendering of ourselves. It requires us to make series of personal sacrifices, not necessarily what we want, but what God wants from us. It requires us to soften our stubborn hearts, so that we may go on to live our lives as guided by the Spirit. Let is go! It is only THEN when reconciliation and healing can effectively take place. **According to John, we are saved not only by the baptism of water, for that’s physical and outward signs and symbols, but by the Spirit and of fire, which is spiritual and from within.**

**Our Advent passage today challenges us to take a leap of commitment towards faith, rather than fears,** especially during times of uncertainties and disruptive chaos in our lives. We must keep our eyes, our ears, and our voices opened. We must remain vigilant and be on the lookout of others who may be leading down the destructive path.

During this season of Advent, may we be inspired to take courage of our faith once again in the prospect of the coming year. **The purpose of Advent is not about looking back into our nostalgia. It’s not about re-constructing or memorializing something that we are used to or accustomed to for decades or even centuries. But instead the season of Advent calls for us to look ahead….beyond the present and into what God has promised for us. “Prepare the Way” of the Lord and make His path straight!**

**Meantime we must wait! We must wait expectedly for the promises of the Messiah’s coming through His PEACE in the midst of a troubling world. We must embrace the JOY that fills our hearts through our mission of sharing the Good News of Christ’s birth. We must share the fruits of our labors by proclaiming God’s LOVE through the light of Christ in the midst of darkness. This is the true message for us for this season of anticipation and preparation of our hearts.** In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Matthew 3:3* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Matthew 3:10* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Matthew 3:7* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)